

Strange Happenings by CuriousNymph

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Summary: It's 1903, and Mike Wheeler doesn't think much is going to happen in the small, Midwest town of Hawkins, Indiana. So when a young girl seemingly appears out of nowhere, Mike is at a loss as to what to do. Strange things are happening in Hawkins: a curious figure seen in the wheat fields, strange people seen about the town, and a strange girl - Eleven - is mixed up in it somehow.

1. Prologue - 'She Fell from the Sky'

So, after a burst of interest on my Tumblr for a particular AU I came up with on the spot (cue Anne of Green Gables reminiscing), this little fic idea emerged. It's set at the turn of the century, based of the aesthetic appeal of period dramas. The billowy shirts, the rumpled hair, the curious side glances - you get the idea.

Although I have no idea how long this will be (not very, I assume, knowing the woeful amount of time I have to do things I actually want to these days), I can at least promise that it won't be too long. Probably about 4 chapters, I would say.

There will be some references I'll link in in the first chapter, so wait up for them. I also can't promise entire historical accuracy, but I'm researching as much as I can and using my favourite period dramas for reference. Look at Anne with an 'E' or 'Far From the Madding Crowd' for the kind of feel I'm going for.

I've got a playlist for this as well (my, how the list grows), so please give that a listen if you can:

[user/ingenioussprite/playlist/5cbW5blGhCuEAn56rEsgm2](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL5cbW5blGhCuEAn56rEsgm2)

As always, please read and review! They are honestly so helpful and encouraging, you have no idea.

Oh, and before I forget: Merry Christmas to everyone who celebrates! I hope you all had a wonderful time, and enjoy the rest of your holidays!

Thank for all the continued support for my work! Enjoy this little prologue.

Michael Wheeler had never considered the town of Hawkins to be a place of any great incident.

But then again, they still had the rest of the century to get through, so maybe he was being a bit hasty.

It was no little known fact that said turn of the century was proving an interesting time for most people. The days of Victorian England were over; the New World was settling down mightily well, with the emergence of a whole new view of modernity sitting itself down for the next 100 years.

Mike wasn't so sure how he felt about the whole thing.

At thirteen years old, Mike hadn't had much experience with things. He'd only just gotten used to the idea of having to take the cart down to the town every time he needed to get things for the farm, or when he needed to consider how best to avoid his mother when she was in a foul mood. Although the farm they lived on reminded him of how remote they were in comparison to the townsfolk, they weren't quite so lonely. If you walked on down from the farm, and took the right turn down the path, you'd come into the richer housing of the townsfolk, with their streets huddled amongst green-leafed trees and geranium bushes, bursting into season as they fell over the front of the fences, wide, open windows glinting in the filtered sunshine.

It was nothing *but* idealistic, he thought. The fresh, flower-filled springs, and warm, heady summers. The burning autumns and bitterly cold winters, with the snow on the ground and the air nipping at his skin like needle pin-pricks.

If anything, Mike rather enjoyed living in the small town of Midwest Indiana.

But nothing much happened there.

People went about their normal routine, and he mostly joined in with them. He travelled down with the horse and cart to the market every Wednesday; he met Mrs Hayes at the Post Office for the usual two letters they got every so often (farmers didn't make for great, local correspondences); he rode down to church every Sunday with his family, though he despised the droning sermons and long hours, which he mostly spent fidgeting with his hands, and staring up at the rafters of the rather meagre church building.

Life was, genially, very normal.

It was 1903 – and he supposed, that meant a lot of things would change.

Some things didn't.

The sidelong looks that the Sinclair family got were mostly all bark and no bite, but it didn't mean insults hadn't been hurled before. Mike, in all his selflessness, was always the first to step in when Lucas was feeling the heat, but it also meant he was always the first to get hit. He didn't mind so much, but his nose rather did, he imagined.

The girls fawned and pouted in the direction of Steven Harrington, the mayor's son, and that sort of meant that Mike and his friends were considered rather unattractive in his wake – despite how they argued that there shouldn't be a comparison in the first place, when Steve was nearly 4 years their senior. Apparently, such details didn't matter to said pouting girls.

Oh. And the weird city-people always came in every 6 months, making inspections of the town. That always happened.

And that was it.

Hawkins was normal.

"Mike, honestly, you're not seriously considering packing up and leaving town, are you?"

Mike sent a scathing look in Lucas' direction, furiously wiping his brow. The work out in the wheat field always proved to be a harrowing task, not least because the early set-in of the evenings was beginning to mean that autumn was truly snatching away their time. Although the trickles of the harvest had already begun, it did not mean the two boys got to save their energy for the main event. With every ray of the sun branding the back of his neck, Mike felt like his skin was peeling away with the heat, loose, linen shirt clammy against his back.

Lucas huffed out a breath, shrugging his shoulders.

"Well, are you?"

"You know how much I hate this place, Lucas. Why is that news to you?" Mike sheared off another handful of wheat with the sickle he currently held.

Lucas shrugged again, dark skin bronzed by the early autumn evening's shine. Despite his rather lowly status, him and Mike were fairly equal in terms of opportunity. They helped each other's families as best as they could, especially if it meant a sly slice of Mrs Sinclair's plum tart. Autumnal harvest could absolutely be worth the back-pain, Mike thought.

"Because as far as I was concerned, you weren't an idiot, and considered how comfortable you are here,"

Mike's look darkened, sticking his sickle into the ground as he brushed off his hands, looking out over the picturesque scene of the early evening. The bronzed sky cast long, golden shadows across the hills, the distant trees' leave cast in copper. The mountain rise further out, nothing more than a blue-violet shadow against the pale blue horizon, made him feel like he was kept in from the world: circled by free-wandering nature and yet feeling like there was no sense of escape if the need ever came upon him. Even gathering wheat in the field by hand became too tiresome and tedious as time went on. Mike needed escape. He *needed* adventure.

They'd only been told to start on the wheat field. But even by that measure, they hadn't gotten very far.

"I just need to get out of here, Lucas. Nothing ever happens. It's all such a bore. I can't even go three miles down the road without being chased back into town by some nutcase from the neighbouring farms." Mike paused for breath. "*Not on my watch, sonny!*" He mimicked the old man he'd encountered the last time, waving his pipe at him in some violently unthreatening gesture of 'hightail it back to your own turf'.

Hawkins closed its roads to most people, but apparently that also meant Mike couldn't get out.

"If I have to do it at night like some highwayman, then I will –"

"Don't be ridiculous, Mike. That's insane – you *sound* insane."

Mike turned to look at him, brushing back his mop of black curls, his hair sticking to his forehead. Although only fourteen, by the August passed, he still looked far older than his age credited him with. The long, unruly curls sat stubbornly upon his head, but were crested with a dozen halos of copper light, freckles like gold dust upon his nose and cheeks, dark eyes like molten copper in the dying light. Maybe his ratty linen shirt, worn breeches, and scuffed boots did not speak well for him, but his looks certainly did. And so did his manner.

All throughout the town, Michael Wheeler was known for his uncanny, gentle manner, as if he meant to befriend anyone he met. Although a temper certainly resided in him, his tears more likely made their appearances more often. He was not one to tie up his emotions with a neat, little bow and forget about them. No – he let them wreck havoc with his heart; let oceans and storms and long, spring days tear into his soul with every breath. Michael Wheeler was no friend to cool indifference. He wore his heart on his sleeve with a pride unlike any of the other boys, who so deftly hid theirs beneath snickers and displays of masculine strength.

He was a farm boy, yes. But he was a boy, and that's what counted.

"Well, I'm not insane, Lucas, so you can go to hell."

"Sue me if you feel I'm being unfair."

"I will - just watch it, Sinclair."

Lucas snorted in laughter, turning to look at the dipping sun, shirt sleeves to his elbows. Only a month younger than Mike was, Lucas had the knack of coming across like his far more matured father, both in the way he held himself and in the way he chastised his friend. If anything, it kept Mike out of trouble. Whether or not that was a good thing was yet to be determined – in some cases, Mike needed excitement or he'd implode.

Lucas, in adamant refusal, was taking no responsibility for the outcome of Mike's prolonged boredom.

"Time to go in, I'd say." Lucas muttered, holding a hand up to cover his eyes, mouth open in thought. Mike turned to look at the sun like his friend, squinting as they watched it shivering behind the horizon, as if afraid to leave the world in darkness. Mike nodded once in approval, turning his head up to the sky as he saw its dark violets, pale oranges and soft blues mingle like lovers above his head.

Time to go in, indeed.

The two boys wedged their sickles up from the ground and trudged up the hill towards the barn, dipping in to set them on the bench before sidling round to the farmhouse in search of some scraps to eat, both their stomachs empty and throats parched.

The inky sky was overruling the fading colours of the evening behind them, one or two pinpricks of light visible in the vast, fathomless gape above their heads, and yet –

The night was yet to begin.

It was only the noises from outside that caused Mike to wake up from his otherwise deep sleep.

Although late storms were nothing of a rarity in Hawkins, Mike had never grown fully accustomed to the idea of there being such a ferocious side to Nature right outside his door. Storms had never scared him, but the aftermath always did – the scenes of destruction never failed to make him cringe and sigh in equal measure, as yet another person's life was torn to pieces by particularly fearsome winds and thundering rain.

Wiping his eyes blearily, Mike scuffled out of the ramshackle heap he called his bed, stumbling through the dark to peer out into the darkness, the metal muntins across the window's glass making it difficult to perceive anything past the dancing silhouettes of the trees outside, the wind battering them as it tried to haul them from their roots.

But there was definitely something out there.

Still amazed to find sleep in his eyes, Mike made the executive

decision to go downstairs, groping for the bannister of the rickety staircase, his feet feeling like they were stepping into open air every time he made a move to go down the next step. Lucas had decided to stay over, taking his place in Mike's room, having been too late to take the walk home when they'd finished their work that day.

Mike turned round to the sound of footsteps following him, Lucas appearing around the corner of the stairs with a positively thunderous look on his face.

"This better be worth waking me up for, Mike,"

Mike snorted in response, brushing away his unruly curls, bed hair making every curl take its own path upon his head, sticking up in so many dark strands that it was hard to tell where his hair ended and forehead began.

Lucas raised a dark eyebrow in response.

"What's going on?"

"There's something out there," Mike replied, shuffling over to the kitchen door, peering out the side window, pushing the curtain away to take a look. The sky had become a heathen of black and grey, like a crosshatch drawing made too dark to see anything distinct. One flash of lightening, however, and Mike jumped back in alarm.

There had been a figure. Just near the fence.

"Mike?" Lucas asked, staring at him in concern.

"Mike!"

Mike, snapping out of the reverie he'd currently been enfolding himself in, turned to his friend, noticing the concerned tone he'd adopted.

"There's someone out there, Lucas,"

"You cannot be serious,"

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

Lucas considered. Mike's face had contorted into one of dark and hazy determination, looking like he was trying to be brave and morally upright at the same time. His eyebrows always creased against his dark eyes when he meant business, appearing at once like the anti-hero of any novel Lucas cared to remember ever reading. There was many a day where Lucas firmly believed Mike belonged better in a book, as the dashing prince or sprightly adventurer of his own, fantastical story, rather than trapped in the underwhelming realities of real life. He suited fiction better than he suited the real world – he always had done.

Lucas was too straightforward to consider himself everything *but* a contender for fictional realities.

"So you plan on going out there? Now I *know* you're insane,"

Mike rolled his eyes, turning to wade through the boots at the door to find his own, just as he hauled on his breeches that he pulled from the chair resting by the small fireplace, coals having long burnt out, the ashes now cold.

His nightshirt felt mightily skimpy when considering the weather he planned on going out into, but he wasn't prepared to reconsider; certainly not when something was wandering about out there on its own. Animal or person or whatever it was.

"Mike, come on – be honest with yourself. You can't seriously think about going out into a storm? You could fall! You could hit your head – die!"

"Lucas, shut up! I won't die, don't be stupid,"

"Stupid? *You're* calling *me* 'stupid'? Says the guy who plans to walk out into a storm in his *nightshirt*!"

Mike snorted in response, done trying to argue his point.

Taking one breath to reassure himself that he was not, in fact, entirely crazy, Mike opened the hatch and stepped outside.

His first thought was that he had made a terrible mistake in coming out here.

The storm felt like it was brewing up such havoc just to spite him – the wind slapped his cheeks, tangled in his hair, made him splutter for breath as he tried to take purchase of what was going on. Staggering down the dirt path, he looked out across the hill, glad for once to be so remote and apart from the town. He felt like he was living in the wild moors of England, like he'd read about; lashing rain, soaking through his shirt to his skin, shivering with the biting air, the trees like gnarled demons arching over to grab him from the ground; the distant mountains like proud, terrifying kings standing against the wind, refusing to bow down to its tantrum.

And in amongst it all, a lone heap of a figure sitting down at the fence, grasping for dear life onto the post.

Mike paused, tried to discern the shape, but it was too dark to see. At least it *looked* human.

Almost slipping down the path, he came to a stop at the bottom, staring through the rain to try and make out what it was.

Stooping down, the figure turned towards him, and Mike nearly jumped back in horror.

It was a girl.

Her short, curly hair was plastered to her forehead, every inch of bare skin smeared with mud and dirt, her eyes dark and soulful, yet as terrified as a trapped rabbit. Her slip of a dress looked too raggedy to even pass as clothing anymore, and her boots were well past their wearable state.

"H – hello?" Mike asked, trying not to shout, but the storm was making it difficult. The wind felt like it was screaming in his ear, trying to deafen him before he could even try to communicate with the girl in front of him. He pushed back his errant curls, now sticking to his forehead again. Christ, he needed a haircut one of these days.

The girl whimpered in response, turning her face back into the post, refusing to budge.

Mike sighed, reaching out a hand to pry away her hands, and she

leaped to her feet, grasping her hands like his skin had singed her. He winced.

"I'm sorry I – I didn't mean to frighten you."

She glared at him, despite her shivering frame. She couldn't be any older than fourteen.

"Look, we *have* to go inside – do you – do you want to come with me?"

The look on her face was hard to discern, but Mike didn't need someone to tell him how she was feeling. It seemed she wore her emotions as boldly as he did, and right now she looked more scared and as equally relieved all in a manner of seconds.

Mike bent down, reaching out a tentative hand towards her, skin sodden as he shivered against the pelting rain, every piece of clothing like a second skin, as wafer thin as paper on his back.

He watched with careful scrutiny as her fingers slipped into his own, at once pulling her up and running with her back to the house, the dirt kicking up against the soles of his shoes as he ran, the rain now almost like fire falling on his cheeks. The girl thudded behind him.

Turning around once, he saw her lying mangled on the path, the dirt having slipped out from underneath her, her ankle now sitting at an odd angle. Mike grit his teeth, dashing back to her with a grim determination, wiping away his curls again. They had to get out of this rain before either of them caught their death.

"You'll need to put your arms round my neck,"

She didn't move, just looking up at him through her tear droplet eyelashes, blinking through the water.

Mike sighed.

"Come on!"

She slipped her frail arms round his neck, her dress slip cool to touch as it brushed past his neck. Mike hauled her up into his arms in one

movement, sweeping her legs up into his arms as he trudged the rest of the way to the door, shoving it open with his back. The door slammed shut behind him as he fell against the wood, breathing in once to remind himself of how his lungs worked. He felt like he'd been reanimated from death, but the dead weight in his arms made him forget his own situation for a moment.

Lucas jumped up from his vision, dark eyes concerned, and then shocked, as he stopped to take note of the heap in his arms.

"Mike, what –?"

"There's no time to explain. She's been out there for God knows how long."

Lucas frowned, wiping his face with his hands, clearly agitated by this turn of events.

"And your parents? Don't you think they'll be a little miffed that you've given them another mouth to feed?"

Mike glared back at him, shifting uncomfortably as he tried to keep a grip on her skin. She was slipping under his hands like silk. They needed to get her warm – quickly.

"Lucas! Never mind that - we need to get her dry – she'll catch her death otherwise," He took a cursory glance at her ankle, the joint somehow appearing wrong by a stretch.

"And her ankle needs looked at - it might be broken, at the least twisted,"

"Because I can see this ending well," Lucas sniffed, peering at her from Mike's left, his brow furrowed in confusion. To all the world, Mike was looking more like a romantic hero by the day, as he let his curly hair, soft features and penchant for saving people construct an image of entire romance about him. Lucas grunted to himself again.

"Who is she, anyways?"

Mike shrugged, stooping his head a little to look in at her face, currently curled into his shoulder as if to hide her from the world, in

fear of seeing something she would never be able to forget. In the damp candlelight, she looked pale as snow, her skin ice cold and patchy with dirt, dark eyelashes curled on her cheeks. Her hair was a mess of damp curls, hanging heavily about her face with the weight of the water, her form slender and delicate, like an orphan left to starve. Mike hefted her up again.

"I – I don't know. It's like she fell from the sky,"

Lucas snorted.

"Yeah, right."

Her eyes snapped open.

Lucas jumped back, yelping.

"Keep your voice down!" Mike hissed, shoving past him towards the stairs, calculating his ascent to his room. A fire needed to get started in a hearth somewhere in the house, and at least up there she'd be hidden from prying eyes – said eyes being his parents'. And her ankle. Mike frowned down at the slender limb - he knew nothing about first aid. The best he could do would be to get a damp towel to keep any swelling down.

"She's a freaky girl, Mike! What do you want me to do, smile at her?"

"You're unnerving her, Lucas! Just keep it down and get her a blanket from somewhere,"

Mike turned to the stairs again, grunting slightly as his arms began to feel numb, the girl's weight beginning to overwhelm him. The girl's arms tightened around his neck, his chest now warm from her frame having been held against him.

"Do you have a name?" Mike whispered down to her, dipping his head a little to look at her face. She was pretty, he thought – blankly so, like she had never known it herself. But she was hollow, like her soul was missing.

Something was missing that should have been there.

At first she didn't answer, blinking up into his face in guarded curiosity, dark eyes narrowed in her pale face. It was only as she turned her cheek into his wet shirt again that he heard her:

"Eleven,"

Mike looked down at her, waiting for more, but nothing came.

He frowned again, the sounds of the storm rattling against the window as he ascended the last flight of stairs.

Eleven.

The girl who fell from the sky.

2. One - 'The Naming of Eleven'

Happy New Year to everybody! I hope everyone had a fantastic time.

Hopefully, this chapter will quench the thirst of anybody who's been wondering where on earth this story might lead. I had a lot of fun writing this chapter, so I hope everyone enjoys it!

Loads of you expressed a certain thrill at the idea of this being a period setting, and I have to say - I'm just as excited! I have always loved period drama (*Pride and Prejudice*, here I come) and there are so many great TV and film adaptations of classical novels out there that give it all the heart and soul that the books give to the story and their characters.

The usage of *Anne of Green Gables* as a reference point is very important, so I urge you to go and seek out *Anne* with an 'E' on Netflix (if it's a convenient option for you), if you're a little unfamiliar with the period setting. My search history at this point is beyond weird: 'Did farmhouses have indoor plumbing?' 'Who could afford a bicycle during the early 1900's?' 'What was the prevalence of the word 'shit' in 1903?'

I swear, it's a crazy ride, folks.

But I'm endeavouring to make this as historically accurate as I can, whilst also allowing some romantic notions sweep in too, à la Mr Darcy-striding-down-a-field type thing. Hopefully you'll enjoy that, too.

Also, here is a link to a great review of *Anne* with an 'E', which addresses the differences between the book and current Netflix series: [/2017/07/anne-with-an-e-redeems-gilbert/](#)

Although it might spark some unpopular opinions, it enlightened me to the idea of having characters serve as a plot point rather than a well-rounded individual, in particular to that book, which made me evaluate how I'll continue on with this story. Mike and Eleven, whilst definitely a romantic couple, are also individuals of their own, and with that in mind, I hope anybody reading this can appreciate that I

will try to make them as important in their own right as they are with each other. I mightn't always succeed, but I'll try my best.

With that all said, enjoy this chapter! Thank you for being such an amazing fandom.

It felt like a long time before the night ended.

Although Mike had long left the storm, it didn't stop it pervading his dreams as he tossed and turned that night, banished to the floor, as Eleven snatched his bed out from under him as her ankle shrieked at her not to stand on it.

He didn't mind sleeping on the floor – that wasn't the issue.

The issue was who the hell Eleven *was*.

By most stretches, Mike could say with confidence what girls were like. He'd been surrounded by them for nearly all his life. First his mother, then his sister, and then the girls at school. Most of them, he felt, were nothing more than annoyances that never shut up. Nancy kept telling him he ought to appreciate them a lot more than he did, but he wasn't prepared to change his mind. They teased him and laughed at him as much as the other boys pushed him around, even if he was known for throwing a punch if he was provoked. They told him he wasn't anywhere near as handsome or 'lovely' as Steve Harrington, but again – he wasn't prepared to compete with a guy nearly 4 years ahead of him.

No. What unsettled him about Eleven was how *unusual* she was.

And not just because she was a girl. Just as a *person*.

As the sunlight shifted through his window, Mike waking up once again with bleary eyes and a dry mouth, he took a glance at the heap curled up on top of his sheets, a careless, hole-ridden blanket thrown on top of her. Sitting up again, he threw his arms tiredly over his raised legs, only briefly noticing he hadn't changed out of yesterday's shirt and trousers, braces hanging in tangled messes around his legs. No wonder he'd been uncomfortable all night.

He watched quietly as the girl turned over on her side, sleeping face brought into his view as she breathed out once, curling her face deeper into her arms, crinkling the sheets a little as she subconsciously tried to find where all the warmth had gone. Most of the blanket had pooled on the floor, only still covering her legs thanks to it being held between them. Mike snorted to himself in laughter, not sure how to react. He'd never seen someone sleep before – not so closely, anyways. Not alone.

Yet even in her sleep, curly hair a mess and cheeks a little red from the cold, she looked troubled. She wasn't one of those people who lost all tension the moment their eyes fluttered shut. She held the concern and worry between her eyebrows constantly, perhaps too used to the emotion to let it go so easily.

Mike shifted onto his knees, dipping his chin onto his forearms as he leant onto the bedcovers, breathing quietly to himself as he watched her. Her leg shot forward at that moment, kicking him in the face, sending him sprawling to the floor with a yelp as her eyes flew open.

Mike blinked up at her, watching as she flinched and slid up to the headboard, keeping a weary, unmoving gaze on his form. He blinked back, for a moment uncertain as to whether bolting out the bedroom door was still a viable reaction. He wilfully chose against it – Eleven, whoever she was, was scared and alone, and by no way in hell was he just going to leave her on her own again.

"You're up," he brightened up his face, smiling joyfully, in an attempt to pose himself as no threat to her. It didn't seem to be working. Eleven's face was contorted into one of adamant distrust and equal disgust, perhaps at his messy hair or something. He didn't really want to dwell on it.

Mike sighed.

Well. That had been a short conversation.

"Where... am I?" her voice startled him a little, like a midday bell heard from miles away. Clear in its thoughts, quiet in its hearing. Mike smoothed down his trousers as he stood up, taking a glance at the bed in consideration. When she made no obvious objection, he sat

down at the end, the bed creaking under the added weight. Eleven's grip on the bedsheets tightened just a little.

"You're... uh, you're at my house. I found you out in the storm last night. So – I brought you in. How's your ankle?"

It was only in that moment that Mike took a proper look at her, no longer feeling like an intruder upon her personal space as she slept. Her expression was vacant yet guarded; she was small but altogether very present, no hint of uncertainty about who *she* was. She was pretty, Mike thought – with her soft, curly hair and dark brown eyes, but she wore her beauty rather bluntly, and unconventionally; the sort of beauty that only certain people could appreciate in the right way. The unusual beauty of a rainstorm or lightning bolt. The drooping willow tree or the bluebell plucked at the stem.

She was just... *weird*.

She seemed transfixed upon him, eyes glancing over him like she almost couldn't believe he was there, just as she turned her disbelief to her ankle. Whilst him and Lucas had managed to keep down the swelling, they had no guarantee of how good a condition her foot was in at this point, having not an ounce of medical knowledge between them. They'd only gone on what they knew from their own experience.

"... OK," she decided, twirling the joint a little. She winced as she turned her foot to the right, Mike looking on in confusion.

"You've probably just strained it," he muttered, but she just dismissed his comment. It meant nothing to her.

"Um... are you hungry? We can make you some breakfast if you want?"

Eleven looked at him again, sitting back on the pillow a little as she kept her ankle on the blanket, raised by the layered sheets she'd thrown back.

Although she could certainly remember the storm from last night – and, indeed, many other things – she hadn't been able to properly

determine who or what the boy had been. She'd been bleary eyed and confused, dazed by the trip. Running away from institutions was proving a lot more taxing than she'd anticipated.

He sat on her bedsheets – or rather, his own – twirling his long, pale fingers with an absent-minded focus, looking at her from the corner of his eye, glancing back all the time, observing her and trying to pretend he wasn't simultaneously. She was already rather taken aback by how – *different* he looked, compared to what she'd seen, and imagined, in her time. His hair was somewhat fascinating – a hailstorm of black curls, spiralling out all over his head, the morning sunshine weaving itself through the coils like golden thread, turning some of it copper and bronze. He was lanky, she thought – like his body was growing too quickly for his limbs to catch up, and he was pale, despite the light tan he'd acquired that summer. But his face – she couldn't quite grasp how he'd managed to construct such a thing by himself.

It was a face that wore everything in an innocent, blatant way, no emotion unseen upon his features. Maybe for some, she thought, he would appear unusual – not the kind of boy who normally stepped out of the doors in the houses of Hawkins. But to her, for all her simple view of things, he was beautiful.

Dark eyes – big and sad and lonely, all fluttering eyelashes and downcast looks, cheeks blooming crimson whenever he looked at her for too long. Freckles across his nose; a bridge of copper sprinkled like fairy dust on his skin. A high brow - dark too; a proud sort of nose, even if she doubted he had much pride to begin with.

And soft lips. That much she could make out most obviously.

He was fine boned too, cheekbones making a deft sweep of his face, but he somehow looked like he'd done a lot of frowning in his short time.

But she had to stop looking, because he had been staring at her for nigh on a minute, frown creasing his brow as he became more and more unsettled by her captured gaze.

Eleven dipped her head in shame, worrying for a moment that too

much staring was enough of a reason to hurl her back out into the wild.

She took a peek at him again, finding him much closer to her than she'd expected.

She let out a squeak, making her cringe inwardly, just as he tilted his head a little, curls flopping to the side.

"Are you alright?" Even his voice was making her pause; not altogether grown up but trying to attempt it, at the very least. It was an assuring voice – one that was made to speak for the comfort of others.

She nodded her head instantly, falling back a little more as he leant back, nodding to himself once. She tried to tear her eyes away from his rather tatty shirt, the unbuttoned, stiff collar doing nothing to hide the beginnings of his pale, slender shoulders.

Eleven swallowed carefully.

"Water," she said, hoping the one word would be enough to get across the information.

Mike sprung to attention, blinking out of his thought as he turned to look at her again, still unsure about how to deal with this unusual girl. She had been looking straight at him for nearly two minutes now, and although he certainly appreciated such rapt attention, it was making him a little desperate to get out of the room, away from those brown eyes, that he found painstakingly difficult to ignore.

Nearly leaping off the bed, Mike nodded.

"Water. Right. No problem," He made to turn to the door, but paused, hand resting on the bed frame as he turned around, looking at the heap Eleven lay in, cotton dress slip, sheets and limbs all tangled up and confused with each other after her somewhat tormented sleep.

"T'm... Mike, by the way. Michael Wheeler."

Eleven looked up at him carefully, eyes blinking slowly. Mike felt like the world was slowing down around him.

"Mike," she tested out the name, seeing how it sounded with her voice, and she smiled a little, almost shyly, to herself.

Mike smiled back to her, and Eleven blinked again, captivated by it. Such an unusual thing, smiling. Yet he made it look so easy – brightening his eyes and making him appear almost content in the morning light.

Like waking up from a pleasant, whimsical dream and still lingering in the idea that it had actually happened.

Eleven was still wondering if the boy she'd been dreaming about for ages now – of his dark, sad eyes, and dark, curly hair, and soft, gentle smile - could really be standing in front of her.

"Mike, we can't do this! You know as well as I do –!"

"I actually don't know *what* you know – all *I* know is that you're insane!"

Mike threw the drying cloth into the deep sink, turning around and gripping its edge behind him, crossing his legs in a show of fierce determination and simmering frustration.

"Then what do you suggest we do, if you're so clever?"

Lucas snorted in disbelief, running a hand through his tight curls, kept cropped short by his mother, probably as a reaction to Mike's out-of-control mane. He was leaning back against the ancient, rickety table, arms crossed in vehement disagreement. The two boys looked like they were on the verge of war: Mike, passionate and fierce and also stupidly selfless, facing off against the practical, logical, if not also annoyingly sceptical, Lucas.

Certainly not a match one would have considered to concern itself with the idea of friendship.

"Bite your tongue, Mike – you know what I mean. We don't even know who she is!" He gestured wildly to the upstairs. "For all we know, she could be a ghost – a beggar, a thief, a murderer-!"

"Don't be stupid, Lucas!" Mike spat back, gripping the sink edge in

frustration. "Can you even hear yourself?!"

"I can hear myself speaking plainly," Lucas snapped, brow furrowing with a look comparable to that of the onslaught of dark storm clouds. Mike sniffed.

"You're being ridiculous – a *murderer*? She was out there *alone*,"

"Because that absolves her of any issue, is that what you're saying?"

"No!"

"Then what *are* you saying? Have you even asked her what she was doing out there? What about her surname? Her family? Where'd she *come* from?"

Mike clenched his jaw in agitation.

"And risk scaring her off with so many questions? Sounds like a great plan, Lucas – why don't you go up and tell her yourself,"

Lucas barked out a harsh laugh. *Ha ha ha*.

"I will not be going anywhere *near* that girl until we decide whether or not she's even *human*,"

Mike leapt up from his place in front of the sink, heading towards the stairs, shaking his head in adamant disbelief. Lucas had been a firm friend to him ever since the first day he'd thrown the first punch at the guy who'd dared to mock his friend's skin, but sometimes even his practicality could prove infuriatingly *adult*.

"If you want to be a sordid coward then that's your problem, not mine," Mike laughed out, but there was no joy in the sound.

"I'm not a coward, Mike! You're just an idiot!"

Mike was already halfway up the stairs when he realized he hadn't actually gotten the water he'd promised Eleven. Storming back into the kitchen, Mike grabbed the nearest cup and filled it with water from the jug, sending Lucas a defiant glance before storming back up the stairs, water sloshing over the rim a little. Lucas shook his head at

Mike's retreating back, curious for a moment as to why he cared so much about her. From what Lucas had seen, trusting someone so indefinitely - so quickly - only ever led to trouble.

Especially when there wasn't a scratch on her despite the storm.

It was only after Mike had come back down the stairs that Lucas pitched the next major question.

"So if we're keeping her –"

"She's not a dog, Lucas!"

At this comment, Lucas raised his eyes, almost daring Mike to consider how he'd been reacting to her since they'd found her, but decided against more petty arguments. Whoever this 'Eleven' was, she was going to be a serious issue if they didn't figure out a way to keep her safe.

"Pfft. Look, whoever she is, she needs clothes –"

"What? Why?!"

Lucas snorted through his nose, astonished as to how Mike could have been so oblivious.

"Have you seen her clothes at the minute? I'll be amazed if she doesn't catch a cold in the next few hours,"

"Just give her some of your clothes,"

"She's not getting any of mine!"

Mike glared at Lucas from the door, hand resting on the frame. Perhaps he'd been too hasty to suggest such a change, but Mike was still marvelling at how Lucas could be so heartless when Eleven was clearly a lost girl adrift in an open sea, with no idea where to turn.

Maybe *he* was being the ridiculous one.

Mike refused to believe it. You didn't just *abandon* people when they needed help.

"Fine," Mike snapped, shaking his head, his curls falling into his face. He brushed them away hastily, glancing around the kitchen. For its high windows and wood interior, simple and basic and plain, it made for a cosy reminder of how much he ought to appreciate what he *did* have. The midday sun was casting its light through the panes, the dust floating amongst the gold beams like dandelion seeds blown away as a wish.

Simplistic, and yet... somehow filled with identity and personality without trying to appear as more than it was. Mike supposed the endless hills and golden sunsets and skies above their head, making the world look so big – just outside the door – was making up for the lack of luxury in the house.

He did love the outdoors, after all.

"She can wear my clothes, then," Mike declared, standing up straighter, watching as Lucas' face fell into a state of simultaneous shock and hilarity at the idea. He seemed to snicker, trying to fight back the laugh, but it escaped before he could quell it.

"You're crazy," Lucas choked out, leaning forward on the table this time. "You're *actually* crazy. How are you going to pass her off as a boy? Look at her, Mike! She's the most obvious looking girl *I've* ever seen!"

"Her hair's short!"

"So? What does *that* say? Oh, let's think – yeah, *her hair's short*."

Mike waved his hand non-committedly, wiping his eyes in exhaustion, just as he made to stand in front of Lucas, gaze sharp.

"Why are you so against her being here?!"

Lucas leant back, arms folding themselves across his chest, his expression not unforgiving but certainly trying to appear sensible.

"Because she's not one of us, Mike. She's come out of nowhere – like you said, she could have fallen from the sky for all we know. And you're just *waltzing* in here-"

"I did not *waltz* in here with her –"

Lucas pointed a finger at him, raising his eyebrows in vehement disagreement again. He'd been doing that a lot lately. One of these days, Mike was going to ask him to be a little more accommodating.

But then again, Lucas had gone through a lot in his time at Hawkins. No matter how you wanted to look at it, being a member of one of the only two black families in the area, he'd known disregard and ignorance before Mike had even been able to walk. He'd known what it was like to be spat on and looked down at, and for all of it, he'd learned to keep his mental and emotional walls up so high that you had to climb them before he let you in.

Lucas knew uncertainty, and he knew dysfunctional life.

And he knew, above anyone else, what 'unwanted' looked and felt like. No matter how undeserving he'd been of the torture, it'd still been dished out to him, and he'd never forgiven the people who'd done it. And rightly so.

"No, you listen, Mike, because I'm not having you pull this shit on me again. I'm just not. Consider your mother, your father – what are they going to say? How are they going to provide for her?"

"I'm not planning on telling them!"

Lucas nodded his head in mock understanding, standing back once again with his arms folded, eyes wide and cautionary.

"Oh, right, right – so how are *you* going to provide for her? This town might have its rich people, but I'll tell you what it doesn't have – *any more space*. You seriously think they're not going to notice her? Small towns are small towns, Mike, and whether you like it or not, they're judgmental. I know that first-hand, so don't bullshit me." Lucas' face had grown hard, reliving the personal side of his argument. Mike had frozen, breathing in once heavily, realizing exactly where Lucas was going with this.

This had never been about her being a problem.

This had been about her being *someone else's* problem.

Lucas had spent too long fighting off prejudice to suddenly have someone suffer their own personal version of it. He was right – no matter the people in them, small towns were, at their heart, too close for comfort. Maybe it was different everywhere else. Maybe it was just Hawkins. But outsiders were always ostracized – always taken aside and made known of how unwanted they were.

Lucas hadn't wanted Eleven to suffer that, if she ever decided to brave outside the walls of the Wheeler house.

But the truth remained: she wouldn't ever *truly* belong, even if she lived here the rest of her life.

Or, at least until the older generations died.

"Lucas, I'm not –"

Lucas sighed, bowing his head. At once, he looked just as young as she should do. For the majority of the time, Lucas could appear nearly twice his age, having grown up fairly quickly in comparison to Mike. He'd been a quick starter, shooting up before Mike even knew what was going on, but now Mike had regained his height, standing at 5'8 without even trying.

And yet, Lucas could still manage to make him feel small.

"Mike, I just – she's scared, Mike. And yes, she's a freak, but not anymore than we are. But you can't throw her out into that, Mike. You just *can't*. She would never stand it – people are cruel. You and I *both* know that."

Indeed they had. Mike and Lucas, and Dustin and Will – the two boys who lived at opposite ends of the street in the town – all knew what a punch in the face felt like, just because the Bank Boys (so called for being part of the social hierarchy) felt like seeing how many hits it took to break their knuckles.

"I know, Lucas. But –"

"She needs clothes, Mike. To at least *try* and appear like a normal girl."

Mike sighed, running an errant hand through his shock of black hair again. This was causing him the biggest headache since he'd hit his head on the paddock door at the age of 10. In his defence, the new farming equipment had been rather distracting when he was that age, but that had meant foregoing looking *where* he was going.

"Alright, then we'll go down to town and buy her something,"

If looks could kill, Lucas would be hitting him into the floor with the amount of disbelief in his expression.

As it was, he glared at his head like he planned on hitting it first.

"Yeah, 'cause we have the money for that,"

"Money?"

The two boys swung round at the soft voice, clear as a bell, and saw Eleven standing in the doorway, a blanket haphazardly thrown around her shoulders like a makeshift cape. Her eyes looked confused – *alone* – but the firm line of her mouth demanded that they answer the question.

Mike sprung into action.

"Money, yeah – you know, stuff that you can exchange for – goods. Food, clothing,"

Eleven did not look at all convinced, the blanket folding around her shoulders as she pulled it up to her neck, from some invisible cold that Mike was apparently exempt from.

"Oh," she muttered, looking up to the ceiling in confusion, before her eyes widened significantly at her surroundings, question now forgotten. There were faint, violet sweeps under her eyes – a sure sign of exhaustion – but her gaze was darting around the place, pupils wide and her blinking slow, as she turned in a circle, breathing quietly to herself as she padded to the window, trailing her fingers down the thin curtain and peering out of the pane, hands gripping the sill.

And then she was turning around again, feet bare as she shuffled

around the room, lifting things up, peering into flower vases, ducking under tables, picking up cups, putting them down again. Mike and Lucas watched her in fervent bewilderment, not sure what to make of her. Even now, in the bright light of the early afternoon - the clock on the wall singing out the time with every chime of its metal heart - Eleven looked too obscure in what Mike considered a fairly average home.

Like she'd fallen from the sky, indeed.

Her hair was wild, her skin was pale, her eyes were large and bright and constantly alert; her feet looked ragged and her nails were long. She was unkempt, like she'd been walking along the world's edge entirely alone, and for some reason – Mike almost believed it.

"What is she doing?" Lucas leant over, whispering into Mike's ear with a clipped tone at hand, his voice saying everything there was to be said: Eleven was freaking him out.

"Uh... looking?" Mike suggested, turning to look at his friend with a mildly hopeful gaze on his face. Lucas' eyes narrowed.

"Seriously?"

Mike waved his hand randomly in her direction, as she tested out the wooden chair near the fire, body going stiff as it rocked precariously to one side, her legs instantly wrapping themselves around the bottom as her hands gripped the seat.

"She's... curious, I guess. She doesn't know what normal life is like –"

"I can see that," Lucas hissed, but all venom had since dissipated from his voice. As they both stood watching her, they realized, almost instantaneously –

This girl would be with them for a very long time.

"So how exactly do you plan on getting her some clothes?"

Lucas' voice was right up in Mike's ear, as the three of them stood stooped behind a cart full of the latest harvest, as many people had moved to the centre of town for the latest market that had set up.

Although Wednesday market was usually fairly busy, today it looked even more packed than Mike had anticipated.

Mike bit his lip in concentration, surveying the scene. The streets in Hawkins were generally wide, with the brick buildings sloping round with the turns in the road, horses trotting by with their carts in tow, hooves clacking off the cobblestones. The day was bright – the sort of crisp freshness that came with early autumn, but there was the scent of rain in the air, like a promise waiting to be fulfilled. They would need to be quick.

They ducked behind the cart as two men passed by, hands in pockets as they tipped their hats to the passing lady on the other side. Mike held his hand out to keep Lucas and Eleven back, just as he peered round the side of the cart again, gripping the wheel lightly.

"Right. The market's bound to have a dress of some description, so we'll see what we can find for you – Eleven?"

He turned round to look at her, startling for a second when he remembered she wasn't wearing the cotton dress slip they'd found her in. She was wearing a raggedy jacket and pair of trousers that he had long since grown out of, her boots from last night dried out enough for her to wear. The jumper had been his current one, the shirt also his, but the sleeve had been torn in a fight - or rather, beat-up - that Mike had still neglected to tell his mother about. Add to that the baker-boy style cap, the peak hanging down over her eyes, with her hair stuffed up into it, and she looked like the perfect boy, save for her rather slender features. She was just going to have to act like she was twelve years old, it would seem.

Mike swallowed carefully.

"What size are you?" he whispered to her, ignoring Lucas' disgruntled expression as Mike looked at her with wide eyes, imploring an answer.

"I... don't know,"

"Ughhhhh," Lucas groaned, turning to look over the top of the cart again, already agitated by how long this was taking. Staying here any

longer was increasing their chances of getting caught.

"Shut up, Lucas," Mike hissed, scrambling over to her as he turned her around by the shoulders to face him, looking at his shirt. It wasn't too shabby on her, and seemed to fit well enough, if not a little big on her slim frame. Crawling back to the front, he pulled Lucas back by the scruff of his shirt.

"Small size, I think. See anything?"

"Apart from this all going to shit in the near future?"

Mike's deadpan stare only served to make Lucas' eyes widen, protesting against what he believed was going to be a first-rate disaster.

"Mrs Talmadge usually has dresses that nobody wants – I'm sure you could get them for cheap, right?"

Lucas frowned.

"We don't have the money, Mike - you didn't tell me to bring any!"

There was a pause, only punctuated by Eleven's squeak as she lost her footing momentarily, scraping her hand on the ground as she knelt on the balls of her feet again, gripping the wheel of the cart for dear life.

"Fine. I'll just pay her back later," Mike declared, and darted out from the cart.

"Mike! Mike! You can't just -!" Lucas hissed, reaching out to grab Mike's shirt, but he missed by several inches.

There was no point waiting. Lucas darted out after him, only to turn around at the last moment, a finger pointing in Eleven's direction.

"You – stay there. Right there. We'll be back – soon, I guess."

Eleven nodded sagely, curling up against the wheel, just as Lucas sprinted after Mike.

"I hope," he muttered to himself, knowing full well that this was going to get them all thrown out of the town.

It was only as they reached the market stall that Mike was beginning to realize how troublesome the whole affair might actually turn out.

"What are you doing?!" Lucas snapped, as he guarded Mike's back, his friend rifling through the piles of dresses sitting on the table, some hanging up on a rickety, wooden stand that looked better for chopping up and putting on a fire than holding up dresses.

"I don't even know what I'm – *looking* for," Mike huffed, pulling up each dress with a desperate look on his face, taking in the ruffled fabric and pleats, or the patterned sleeves and worn aprons, or the frivolous bows tying it up at the back.

"Mike! Get down!" Lucas snapped, as the two boys dived for the ground, the dresses a slumped pile on the table as people passed by, Lucas peering out from under the table to view the oncoming hoards.

"Mike, we need to be quick, people are –" Lucas' sentence came to an abrupt halt as his throat ran dry, watching as a figure ran towards them, albeit rather carelessly, her ankle still stiff, cuffs flapping about past her hands and face entirely obscured by her ill-fitting hat.

Lucas jumped up, darting out from under the table.

"Lucas, where are you going?! You can't just -!"

Mike leapt up from his position on the floor, worrying away his lip in agitation as he scanned the ever-growing crowds of people, more than aware of how outrageous a boy rifling through women's clothing looked.

Thinking of no alternative, he tipped half the dresses to the side, lifting up one from the bottom, nerves electric as his hands shook with the adrenaline, not sure how long he had before Mrs Talmadge came back and found her display ruined by his unruly behaviour.

It was a simple thing, not like the frivolous and dizzying spectacle of dresses preceding. It was a soft brown, with a high collar and long sleeves, coming down to just above the wearer's knees. It was nothing

fancy, but with Eleven being the way she was, perhaps that was a good thing.

Yanking it out from the pile, he scrunched it up under his arm, just as Lucas came hurtling back down the street, someone in tow.

"Lucas, what in the heck are you doing?!" Mike snapped, just as he caught sight of the person with him, peering around Lucas' back, hair and hat hanging in their eyes.

Eleven raised up the peak of her hat with her thumb, looking out rather guiltily at Mike, despite the determination planted on her face.

"El, what the -?! Lucas -!"

"It wasn't my fault! She just came running down the street!"

Although Mike certainly did believe that it wasn't entirely Lucas' fault, he couldn't help but feel exposed, standing in amongst the scattered mess of dresses with the two of them. Glancing around, he caught sight of a few people looking curiously over at him, but dismissing the scene almost instantly. Mike swallowed carefully, pulling out the scrunched up dress and throwing it up to Eleven's slight frame, testing its fit against her.

"How's that?" He asked her hastily, Lucas and him glancing back at the growing glances over at them.

"Mike," Lucas warned, his face tense.

"It'll do – right, come on, El –"

Parading her out from the stall, they had just enough time to hear somebody shout over, "What are you doing over there?!", before a whole crowd turned to watch as Mrs Talmadge came hurtling down the street, Mike, Lucas and Eleven sprinting up the the opposite end with the dress flapping out behind them, Mike grabbing Eleven's hand as they went.

"Thieves! Filthy scoundrels! Come back here this instant!"

Mike looked back at Mrs Talmadge, who was having difficulty

running in her long, equally frilly dress, hiking her skirts up as she pointed her finger after them.

"Michael Wheeler, come back here, so help me, or your mother will hear about this! COME BACK HERE RIGHT NOW!"

Mike couldn't help but let loose a laugh as they hiked up the street, disappearing round the corner, continuing to run all the way to the farmhouse again.

Arriving in a state akin to that of having been thrown down a hill, they trekked inside, Lucas throwing himself into a chair as Mike handed Eleven the dress, taking off her hat and jacket as she gingerly held the material, running her fingers over the cuffs of the sleeves and the hem of the skirt.

"It's not much, but it'll do until – well, whenever," he sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

Eleven looked up at him, watching as the mid-afternoon sunshine once again cut a bright picture through the window, casting him in a bronzed glow, cheeks red from the running as he tried to regain his breath.

"They'll want to know who that was, Mike," Lucas said from the other side of the room, making Mike lean against the door, head back against the wood.

"Give her a different name, then," Mike said, folding his arms. Lucas looked unimpressed.

"Like what? We can't just *rename* her, Mike. We don't even know what her real name *is* anyway,"

Mike huffed in annoyance.

"Then give her one that'll go unnoticed, like... I dunno, Jane or something,"

Lucas raised an eyebrow, shifting to look at Eleven, who sat with her legs curled under her chair, the dress an object of fascination for her.

"Jane?" Lucas tried, and Eleven looked up, confusion flitting across her face.

"Eleven," she insisted, pointing to her linen shirted chest. Mike jumped in to explain.

"Yeah, we know, but... can we call you Jane, El?"

Her eyes grew wide in a mixture of panic and bewilderment, one eyebrow making a swift raise up her face as she prepared to force his hand to keep her name as she knew it to be.

Mike hurried to clarify.

"Like, just as a different name – so you won't be recognized,"

Eleven's eyes softened, drifting down to her lap as she fiddled with the stitching on the cuff of the sleeve.

"OK," she murmured, and Mike and Lucas sighed simultaneously, Mike slumping his head back against the wood of the door with an audible *thunk*.

There was a pause in the room, the three of them collapsed into silence as they contemplated the past hours. Lucas bent forward, hands clasped in concentration.

"We can't pretend forever, Mike. People are going to start asking questions – especially after what we did today. We need to find out where she's from, before anyone else starts asking questions."

"I know," he muttered, but didn't further the answer.

For all his time spent here, Mike still often felt like he was the outcast in a society that only admired perfect obedience and perfect obligation. Yes, stealing a dress had not been a good idea – he knew it would come back to bite him in the end.

But Mike had spent a lot of his life trying desperately to fight to be accepted as something more than 'just a farmboy', and Eleven – whoever she was – was falling into the same rut he'd found himself in countless times before, just like Lucas, Dustin and Will.

The choice of being accepted and being who you were was tough – especially when prying eyes would often always question you, no matter who you were.

Eleven was all of this, just without saying so herself.

The fact that she'd barely spoken at all worried him, and it worried Lucas too. The both of them couldn't fathom how she had managed to get here, all alone.

How had she survived? How had she become who she was?

And why was she afraid?

Mike moved away from the door, going to stand by the window as he stole a glance back at her, wondering why he could see his younger self in her.

She still sat with the dress in her hands, pressing the length against her legs as she imagined it swishing about her knees.

Maybe some mysteries took their time.

For anybody who hasn't seen this yet, please check out this post:

[post/169092309577/feedback-culture-is-dead-long-live-feedback](https://www.tumblr.com/post/169092309577/feedback-culture-is-dead-long-live-feedback)

It puts into words some of the frustrations or issues some people may have with how best to interact with authors and their favourite stories, and vice versa, with writers and how best to interact with their readers. The feedback authors get can honestly lift up their day - it certainly does for me. It's something most people can identify with, so just because I felt it important for any of my readers to see this, if you can, take some time out to have a read at the post.

Thanks again to everybody who comments on my stories and reblogs my story posts on tumblr - it's an absolute joy to interact with such enthusiastic people and it's really helped my confidence as a fanfic writer grow.

You're all amazing! :)

See you next chapter.